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ABSTRACT

Research conducted by Eastern Stream Child Abuse Prevention and Education (ESCAPE) from 1982-1985 clearly identified migrant children as a population at high risk of being maltreated. It is therefore imperative that migrant teachers understand the dynamics of maltreatment and what they, as individuals, can do to prevent it. Child abuse is frequently the end result of the numerous stresses experienced by migrant families: uncertain employment, geographic and social isolation, poor living conditions, poverty, and frequent moves that prevent families from establishing community ties and support systems. In coping with child abuse the teacher must play the roles of observer, listener, home visitor, reporter, and child advocate. If a child discloses that he or she has been or is presently being maltreated, the teacher should understand how to cope with the information in a manner that will bring about a significant positive change in the child's life. Guidelines include being calm, finding a private place to talk, believing the child, stressing that it is not the child's fault, respecting the child's privacy, being supportive, being truthful, making a report immediately, and being willing to serve as the child's advocate. A list of eight resources for teachers is included. (JHZ)

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MIGRANT EDUCATION

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Teaching the Abused Migrant Child; What's a Teacher to Do?

By

Lorrie Wolverton

March 1988

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Teaching the Abused Migrant Child; What's a Teacher to Do?

Research conducted by ESCAPE (Eastern Stream Child Abuse Prevention and Education) from 1982-85 clearly identified migrant children as a population at a high risk of being maltreated. It is imperative, therefore, that migrant teachers understand the dynamics of maltreatment and what they as individuals can do to prevent it.

What are the causes of child abuse in migrant families?

The life of migrant families is a stressful one--characterized by uncertain employment conditions, geographic and social isolation, poor living conditions, poverty, and mobility. The frequent moves often prevent families from establishing community ties, availing themselves of support services that might lessen stress, and building personal relationships that could alleviate the social isolation. The stresses of poverty have a psychological effect on the family as members struggle to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and appropriate child care. All too frequently the end result of these temptestuous forces on the family is maltreatment.

What are the migrant teachers' roles in dealing with abuse?

Child abuse is a complex problem and its prevention requires action on many fronts. School personnel do spend many hours a day with children and can thus be leaders in prevention. There are many roles for the teacher to play in coping with child abuse in the classroom. None of these roles is unfamiliar to the teacher, especially to the migrant educator who traditionally teaches the whole child and his/her family.

- **Observer:** Be aware of the physical signs of abuse and neglect: maltreatment, behavioral changes, and changes in relationships with peers. Sometimes it is difficult to determine what is different or out of place. Just rememember--if it doesn't seem right, it usually isn't.

- **Listener:** Listen to what children are saying. They may speak directly to you or they may tell a friend that there is something wrong in their lives. They may also speak through play, their writing, or their reaction to books they have read.

- **Home Visitor:** Working closely with the family has always been an integral part of migrant education. Knowledge of the child's home environment is invaluable in assessing the child's educational needs. Additionally, this understanding will help you put what you observe and hear in the proper persepctive. Changes in the home may easily explain changes in the child's behavior. Should an abusive or neglectful situation be indicated, the background you have on the family can be useful in determining supportive services, avenues of communication, and possible causes.

- **Reporter:** Your observations of the child and/or the home environment may lead you to suspect child maltreatment. In most states, teachers and other school personnel are mandated reporters. If so, you should follow the policy of your school district and the procedures of your state in reporting your suspicions. If you are not familiar with your state law, obtain a copy and read it without delay. Remember that by reporting you are taking the first step in rebuilding a family and ending a child's suffering.

Often the migrant family will move before an investigation can be completed or services provided. This is indeed frustrating but you can keep attention focused on the child's needs by recording the symptoms you observed on the child's Migrant Student Record Transfer System form. States have different policies for recording this information. Consult your MSRTS office for the appropriate procedures to follow. Some state Child Protective Services agencies have interstate compacts which allow forwarding of maltreatment case information to the state to which the child has moved. Personnel in the new state will continue investigating and, if possible, continue any services that have been accepted by the family. Contact your Social Service Agency for further information.

Anyone, including an abused child, can report a case of maltreatment by calling the free 24-hour number found in the white pages of the phone book. Some states have a toll free hot line.

- **Advocate:** The child protective system will provide services for the family if maltreatment is indicated. Often the services given to the child victim are limited and other resources must be located. The educational system has a number of resources which help the child, including counseling and remediation. Consider referring the child to the Committee on Special Education. Maltreated children are children with special needs.

If a child's needs exceed the school's resources, perhaps there are appropriate community services available. Try to build a network of support agencies and personnel so that the responsibility can be shared.

- **Teacher:** There is a great need to teach all children the dynamics of child maltreatment. Ensuring their safety is a prime concern. However, children are being bombarded with much information and educators must be sure that youngsters understand what this information means. Some children may be unnecessarily alarmed and others may be fearful to disclose maltreatment.

How should a teacher deal with disclosure?

Children are learning about child abuse and neglect from many sources: television programs, news stories, and school programs. An important message is getting through: "If it happens to you, tell someone! Don't keep it a secret."

Some day a child may come to you and disclose that s/he has been or is presently being maltreated. Perhaps it will happen because of material you present in the classroom, or perhaps it will simply be an expression of the trust that the child has in you. Sharing this secret is a sign that you are viewed as very special to this child and it is crucial that you react in a way that will provide comfort to the child and will result in assistance to the child and family. While your initial reaction may be one of rage, revulsion, even physical illness, you must convey a sense of comfort and security to the child. The manner of your reaction is of crucial importance to the child's self-esteem and can bolster his/her courage to face the aftermath of this revelation.

Listening to a child's disclosure is never easy, but if you understand how to cope with the information in a manner which will bring about a significant positive change in this child's life, it may be a bit easier. Outlined below are some suggestions for how to proceed when a child discloses to you. Every situation is different, and you should always take into consideration your knowledge of this particular child. And remember, you needn't deal with this alone. You can always find someone to help you deal with your own reactions to this very emotional situation.

Do this:

- **Be Calm.** Try to control your own feelings and listen carefully to what the child is saying. Showing your rage or discomfort may make the child feel that s/he has done something wrong.

- **Find a quiet, private place to talk.** Keep in mind that the student may be hurt, in pain, fearful, or apprehensive. S/he should be made as comfortable as possible. If you are uncomfortable discussing this subject, help to arrange for the student to talk with someone else, s/he knows and trusts. Follow-up to make sure that someone is providing the help that is needed.

- **Believe the child.** Victims rarely lie, especially about child abuse. The child may have tried to tell others who wouldn't listen and now is in special need of your trust. Convey to the student that you believe him/her and will try to help. If you doubt the child, s/he may stop talking about the problem.

- **Stress that it is not the child's fault.** Children often believe that they are to blame for the maltreatment.Frequently, the perpetrator tells them that they are at fault and that it wouldn't have happened if they had behaved differently. Reassure the child that s/he is not at fault; however, be careful not to make negative statements about parents or other perpetrators. Maltreated children have ambivalent feelings about abusive parents or relatives and may even feel protective.

- **Respect the child's privacy.** Let the student know that you will respect his/her confidence (that is, you won't tell other teachers or students about the abuse). Explain that you are required to report the abuse to the proper authorities.

- **Be supportive.** Assure the child that s/he is doing the right thing by disclosing this information. A child whodivulges such painful facts is putting him/herself at great risk. Word your questions in a nonjudgmental, open-ended way. Let the student tell you the story in whatever manner is most comfortable. S/he has given away what little control s/he has of this situation and entrusted you to help. Always be accepting of what the child tells you and how s/he tells it.

- **Be truthful.** These children need to learn to trust adults again. Never make promises that you cannot keep. Tell the child that you are required to tell the authorities whose job it is to protect children and help their parents. Explain as much as you know about what action will be taken and what is likely to happen. Assure the student of your support and assistance throughout the process, and follow through on the assurance.

- **Make a report immediately.** Don't wait until the end of the day or the week to report the case. It is imperative that you notify the proper authorities immediately for the sake of the child and to fulfill your legal responsibilities.

- **Be an advocate.** The child will continue to need your support even after a report has been made and the child protection authorities are handling the case. If the child remains in the school do your best to quell rumors and gossip. Provide a shoulder for the child to lean on. Listen to what the child has to say. You may need to advocate for school or community sponsored programs such as counseling, remediation, or support groups so that the child receives professional help.

Don't do this:

- **Allow** the student to feel "in trouble" or "at fault" for the abuse.

- **Criticize** the student's choice of words or language.

- **Try** to be an investigator or press for answers that the student is not comfortable providing.

- **Try** to be a therapist. You can be a sympathetic listener and a great support to the child, but recognize your limitations in dealing with this complex, emotionally-charged situation.

- **Display** shock, anger, digust, or disapproval of the parents, the student, or the situation. You may feel these things, but it is unlikely to be helpful to the student to share these feelings with him/her. Most children, even abused children, love their parents and feel strong loyalty to them.

- Tell the student what s/he is feeling. Talk with the student about how "some people" might feel in a given situation. This leaves him/her free to agree or to express different feelings. Without question, listening to a child describe maltreatment can be a painful and difficult experience. Seek the support and expertise of school and community resources to help you deal with the needs of the child and with your own anguish.

What is a teacher to do?

As a teacher you are entrusted with a real treasure—a child's spirit. It can grow and flourish or it can be crushed. For the abused child, the school may be the only avenue of escape, a place where s/he can feel safe. Your classroom can support the child's needs if you:

- Promote an accepting environment in your classroom.
- Be warm and loving.
- Create an individualized program for the maltreated child.
- Give the maltreated child additional attention wherever possible.
- Create classroom activities that focus on the issue of child abuse.

Can you make a difference?

You became a teacher because you genuinely enjoy children and want to be a positive force in their lives. By fulfilling the roles described above, you have the opportunity to make a **significant difference** in the lives of children. You could be the person to give them the information that prevents an incident of maltreatment or which encourages them to tell someone about it and stop the pain.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Educating others is always a learning process for the teacher as well. Listed below are some resources to prepare you to deal with the topic of child abuse in your classroom.

1.Behanan, N. & Koblinsky, S. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: THE EDUCATORS ROLE IN PREVENTION, DETECTION AND INTERVENTION. Young Children, 1984.

2.Broadhurst, Diane. EDUCATORS, SCHOOLS AND CHILD ABUSE. Chicago: National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, 1986.

3.CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: WHAT THE EDUCATOR SEES. (20 minute film strip and audiocassette.) Order from: National Archive Trust Fund (NAC) National Audio-Visual Center, Attention: Order Section-PQ, Washington, D.C. $15.

4.Dorman, R. (Ed.) PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE IN THE HARVEST: A HANDBOOK FOR MIGRANT EDUCATORS. Ithaca, N.Y.: ESCAPE, Family Life Development Center, Cornell University, 1985. ED 265 982.

5.Hittleman, Margo. WHAT'S A KID TO DO ABOUT CHILD ABUSE? Ithaca, N.Y.: Family Life Development Center, Cornell University.

6.I STILL CAN'T SAY IT. (24 minute documentary showing a multifaceted prevention program created by a local school district.) Order from: Media Services Distribution Center, 7 Research Park, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. 14850. Available on 3/4", 1/2", and Beta Video formats. Cost: $14.00/Rental $70/Purchase 1/2" Video Cassette $100/Purchase 3/4" or Beta.

7.Tower, C. C. CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: A TEACHER'S HANDBOOK FOR DETECTION, REPORTING AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1984.

8.Volpe, R.; Breton, M.; and Mitton, J. (Eds.) THE MALTREATMENT OF THE SCHOOL AGED CHILD. Boston: Lexington Books, D.C. Health & Co. 1980.

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